

THE CHINESE QUARTER OF NEW YORK.

By Warren Taylor.

THE New Yorker who by chance or choice passed through the lower end of Mott Street on the 29th of last January probably emerged from that thoroughfare with a strengthened conviction of the gulf that is fixed between the civilization of the Flowery Kingdom and ours. The metropolis has not, like San Francisco, a Chinese quarter that is a veritable oriental town thrust into the crowded midst of an American city; but the little region just east of the Five Points is the headquarters of a pig tailed population that numbers several thousands, and affords abundant opportunities for the study of Celestial peculiarities. These peculiarities are brought into especial prominence when upon some day of festival Mott Street puts on its best silken gar-

ments and prepares to receive a throng of almond eyed visitors.

Why nineteen Chinamen out of twenty in the Eastern cities, if not ninety nine out of a hundred, should be engaged in one particular vocation, is a sociological problem difficult of solution. The washing of clothes is hardly the work that would be selected *a priori* as the Celestial's most congenial labor, or as that in which he would suffer least from Caucasian prejudices. Mere chance, perhaps, led the pioneer immigrants to take it up and establish a precedent for subsequent arrivals, who flocked into a field where they saw their fellow countrymen successfully established. However this may be, Chinese laundries have flourished and multiplied until there are now six or seven hundred of them in New York, and several hundred more in the adjacent cities and villages. From all these establishments, scattered from the Oranges on the west to the suburbs of Brooklyn on the east, the Celestials look to Mott Street as the focus of social intercourse, of commerce, and of religion, as well as of their favorite peccadilloes of opium smoking and gambling. They may, as is commonly supposed to be the case, work day and night throughout the week, but on Sunday they don spotless raiment and congregate at their chosen rendezvous, attracted, it is to be feared, rather by the fan tan tables than by the shrines of the joss houses.

But Mott Street's ordinary Sunday afternoon dress parade is far outshone by the celebration of the great holiday of the Chinese New Year. The Celestial calendar is as utterly different from that of western nations



A MARKETING EXPEDITION.



THE MASONIC LODGE, NO. 4 MOTT STREET.

as are almost all other products of the Flowery Kingdom. Its months are lunar months of twenty eight days apiece, and its years are of varying length, beginning somewhere in our January or February. With the beginning of each Emperor's reign, a new chronological era is initiated. As the present head of the Pekin dynasty ascended the throne in 1873, the current year, which began on the 29th of January, is reckoned as the twentieth, although just forty two centuries and a half have passed since the beginning of Chinese history under Yao, the imperial sage.

Travelers in China say that indifference to religious matters is a prominent trait of the great mass of the people. It is natural that the same characteristic should be noticeable among the Mott Street colonists. Like the emigrants of other nations, they are drawn mainly from the lower classes of their country, and their Buddhistic faith, which is at best of a degenerate and pagan

order, is hardly likely to be strengthened by long absence from the temples of their fathers. The Chinese population of New York can hardly be called devout. There are but two religious establishments in Mott Street—the old joss house on the top floor of No. 16 and its new rival, opened a little more than a year ago, at No. 4, and known as the Chinese Masonic Lodge. Their shrines are seldom or never besieged by throngs of worshipers, nor are they jealously guarded from the intrusion of unbelieving Caucasians. On the contrary, their sole occupants are usually two or three priests, corpulent and indolent, whose chief purpose in life appears to be the extraction of twenty five cent pieces from the pockets of inquisitive visitors in exchange for small packages of "joss sticks" or pastilles, sold elsewhere for about one fifth of the price.

The one religious principle that is universally strong among the dwellers of the Flowery Kingdom—



A STREET GROUP IN CHINATOWN.

their reverent care for the graves of their ancestors—seems to have at least partially lost its force on this side of the world. The most unkempt corner in Evergreens Cemetery is the space known as Celestial Hill, and set apart for the burial of Chinamen, permanent or temporary—for many of their dead are disinterred and sent back to rest finally in their native soil.

Ceremonies of worship form little part of a Chinese holiday. The new year is indeed ushered in with volleys of firecrackers, intended to frighten away such evil spirits as have not been driven out of the neighborhood by the oft passing elevated trains of Chatham Square; but after this function, dictated by superstition rather than piety, this chief of Celestial festivals takes on a strictly secular character. The celebrants devote their energies to "making happy" after a manner that bears a very faint resemblance to an American holiday. Naturally temperate in the consumption of all intoxicants save opium, they replace the copious libations with which the Caucasian of corresponding social standing

is wont to greet a new year, with occasional sips from wicker covered bottles of sam shu—a spirit distilled from rice. Visiting, once a feature of the day among New Yorkers, is also a Chinese custom. At such a house as that of the Chinese consul—which is not in Mott Street, but in West Ninth, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues—there is deposited a prodigious pile of visiting cards—not the insignificant slips of white paste-board that we are accustomed to leave on our friends, but goodly sheets of pink paper, eight inches to a foot in length and half as much in width, and bearing the owner's name in hieroglyphics of his own designing.

Every one knows the Chinaman's ordinary garb. His unwillingness to discard his black blouse, quaint footwear, and carefully braided cue has been regarded by some of his critics as chief of the barriers that stand between him and western civilization. The converse of this theory might perhaps be upheld. Herr Teufelsdröckh, in his lucubrations on the philosophy of clothes, might perhaps maintain that the Celestial's loose garments are at least as comfortable to comfort, common sense, and the requirements of the climate as are the tight fitting suit, the rigid collar and the illogical headgear of our own fashions. Such speculations may, however, safely be left to Carlyle's imaginary professor.



IN A MOTT STREET RESTAURANT.



AT THE SHRINE OF JOSS.

Practically, the wearer of a cue can never be other, to the popular eye, than a "heathen."

The garments that come forth from his wardrobe on special occasions are still more diversified and striking. Silk is the favorite fabric for these holiday vestments; red, purple, and especially blue, are the predominating hues. His blouse may be scarcely distinguishable from that worn every day, but his trousers and his stockings are of gaudy silk—the former of extra amplitude, and tied in around the ankle. Mott Street at the New Year festival is bright with

colors that contrast markedly with the dingy surroundings of the narrow and dirty thoroughfare. Herein is exemplified another trait of Chinese character—its utter failure to appreciate the virtue of cleanliness, ranked by a Caucasian proverb as next to godliness. In China the poorest classes never change or cleanse a garment—they wear it as some of the Arabs of the Sahara wear their enveloping burnous, until it drops into decay. Such is hardly the case among our Celestial colonists, who do not suffer from the degrading poverty common in their native land.



A MOTT STREET HOUSE.

But their ideas on the subject are certainly peculiar. The uncleanness of their environment seems to give them no concern. They wear their gorgeous silks amid squalor as great as any in the slums of the metropolis. A similar lack of congruity is apparent in the decoration of their joss houses. Visit the old building at No. 16 Mott Street, to find this peculiarity strongly exemplified. Climb the rickety stairway, after noting the coating of red prayer papers plastered about the

entrance of the house. The lower stories are occupied by a restaurant of eminently unattractive appearance, within which may be seen a few stray Celestials, devouring bowls of boiled rice. Chinese etiquette does not forbid them to hold their bowls close to their lips, and shovel the contents into their mouths with a rapidity that bespeaks wonderful skill in the handling of their chopsticks. On the top floor is the temple of Joss, with its curious mixture of decorations. Beside Chinese banners and halberds that are really curious and interesting is a dirty and decrepit mirror of Bowery manufacture that would hardly be tolerated in a Cherry Street tenement. Close to a great shrine of gilded teak wood, whose quaint and elaborate carving would delight the heart of a collector of oriental bricabrac, stand two or three broken down kitchen chairs that were dear at seventy five cents when new. The shrine, it may be added in passing, cannot claim to be a Chinese antiquity. It was carved in Mott Street, and only a few years ago, by Jim Lee, who has since constructed another elaborate altar for the Masonic Lodge.

Mott Street has no architectural peculiarities, unless the term can be applied to the external decoration of some of its buildings with colored lanterns and strange signs. There are perhaps a dozen establishments that deal in Chinese merchandise, whose proprietors are in many cases wealthy and civilized members of the community. The passer by sees in their windows no display of shark fins, starfish, edible seaweed, and other oriental delicacies which they import from the Flowery Kingdom.

